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ABSTRACT

Before the educational reforms of the early 1990s, Kentucky was in the bottom 10% of the states on most indicators of educational quality. Educators and policymakers in Kentucky approached educational reform in a thoughtful and systematic way and developed a state law mandating an education system that now serves as a national model. The education system is based on five basic beliefs: (1) all children, given adequate opportunity and support, can learn, and nearly all can learn at high levels; (2) the school is the best place to make decisions about what happens in the school; (3) high standards produce high achievement; (4) results matter; and (5) financial support for schools must be equitable. These beliefs, and elements of education reform that support them, are examined along with the programs that provide the resources and strategies for Kentucky's success. Today, Kentucky's education system is recognized throughout the nation and the world as a pacesetting, model system. (SLD)

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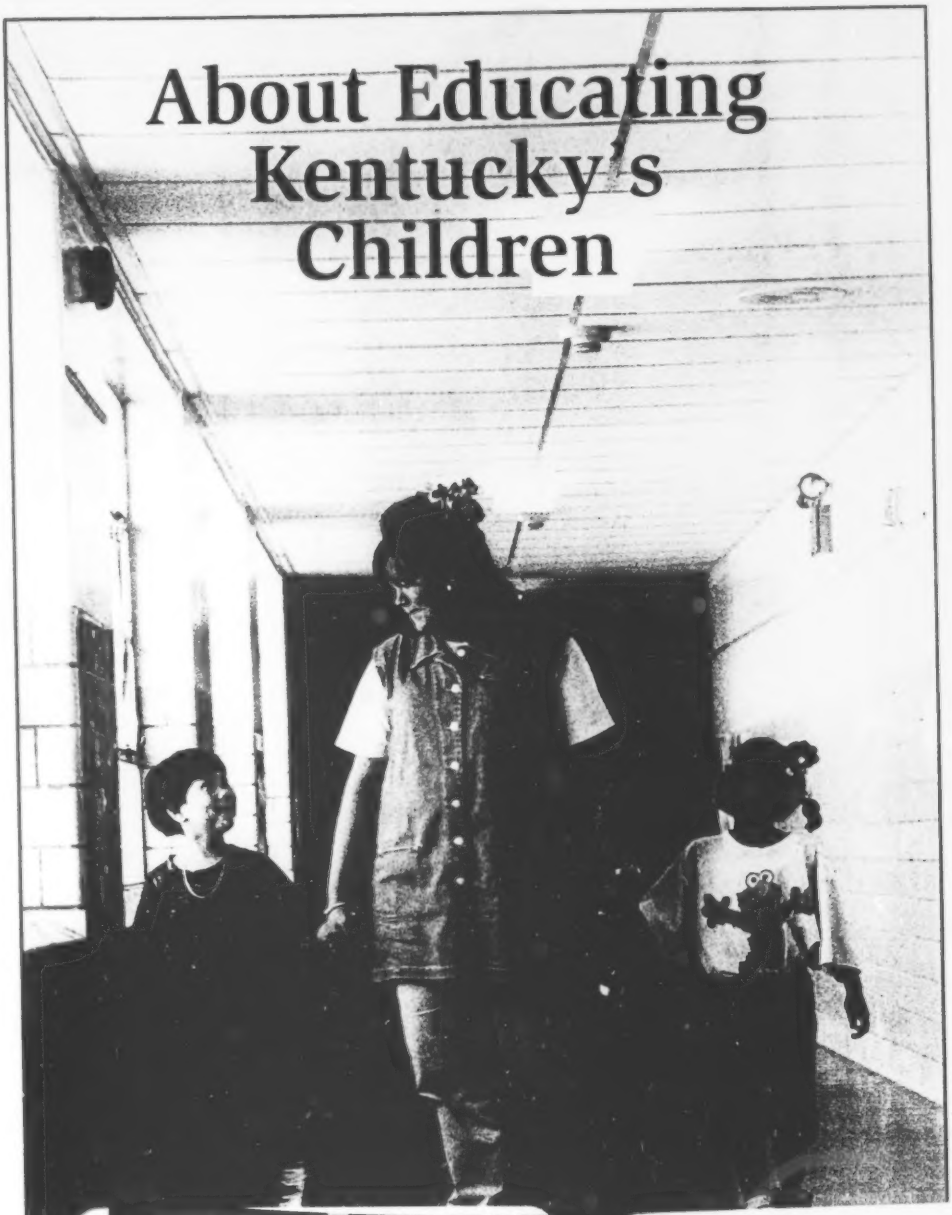
About Educating Kentucky's Children



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Kentucky Department of Education
Wilmer S. Cody, Commissioner
July 1998

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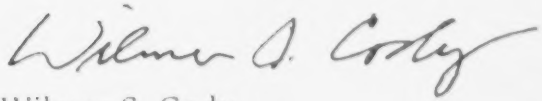
Introduction

Prior to its reformation in 1990, Kentucky's system of public education was consistently near the bottom of the states in virtually every measure of educational quality. Today, Kentucky's education system is recognized throughout the nation and world as a pacesetting, model system. Because the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 revamped virtually every aspect of education in the state, including school finance, curriculum, and governance, it has been carefully examined by educators all over the world.

As might be expected, anything as important to society's future as the education of its children generates continuing questions – and it should. Many of the questions can be answered logically by explaining the fundamental values and beliefs behind the various elements of our education system. This document was created specifically for that purpose. I trust you find it helpful.



Wilmer S. Cody
Commissioner of Education

A New Day for Education in Kentucky

In the 1950s, Kentucky was in the bottom 10 percent of the states on most indicators of educational quality.

In various attempts to correct the situation, between the early 1950s and the mid-1970s, Kentucky policy-makers enacted a number of well-intended school improvement initiatives. Even so, Kentucky still ranked at or near the bottom of the nation on most measures of educational quality and performance.

In 1985, however, 66 school districts, seven boards of education and 22 students filed suit in state court. Their basic plea was financial: "If you expect all districts to get equal results, then give us equal resources." In a landmark ruling that received national attention in 1989, the Kentucky Supreme Court agreed, and declared the entire system of public schools in Kentucky to be unconstitutional. In doing so, the court invalidated the entire body of Kentucky school law and directed the Kentucky legislature to create a new and constitutional system of public schools.

To fulfill that mandate, the leadership of the General Assembly and the governor's office formed the Task Force on Education Reform, which began work in the summer of 1989. The task force set out to create a system of public schools that would be accountable and

productive and that would raise Kentucky off the bottom in both education and economic development. It went about this task in a careful, systematic and thoughtful manner. The result was a groundbreaking law that now serves as a national model.

The resulting education system is based on five basic beliefs:

- All children – given adequate opportunity and support – can learn, and nearly all children can learn at high levels.
- The school is the best place to make decisions about what happens in the school.
- High standards – that is, high expectations – produce high achievement.
- Results matter – we can teach for results and build accountability for results.
- Financial support for schools must be equitable.

Each of these principles is supported by programs that provide the resources, expertise and strategies that ensure success. Even so, the five beliefs themselves are more important than the structure of each program. Any of the supporting programs, implemented in any number of ways, could achieve similar results. The key is that Kentucky has held fast to these principles.

Let us examine these beliefs and the elements of education reform that support them.

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all children can learn, given adequate opportunity and support

Our system of public education challenges every Kentuckian to believe that all children *can* learn, all children *can* respond to challenging subject matter, and nearly all children *can* learn at high levels.

The ability of every child to learn is a function of time, effort and opportunity. That's why Kentucky has a series of initiatives to ensure that students have the opportunity to learn.

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Preschool

Significant mental development occurs by the time a child enters elementary school, and children who are at-risk will do better in school if they gain the basic skills and knowledge most children their age already have. That's why Kentucky provides a statewide preschool program for at-risk 4-year-olds and all 3- and 4-year-olds with developmental delays.

Kentucky's preschool programs have many features to help each child succeed – even those with disabilities or whose economic standing places them at-risk. For example, preschool students in Kentucky are being exposed to the basic building blocks of education and other concepts that will help them once they enter primary school at age five. Meanwhile, many of their parents are being taught parenting skills and about the hygienic, nutritional, physical and social needs of their children.

From 1990 to 1997, the percentage of at-risk 4-year-olds served by Kentucky's preschool program rose from 31 percent to 77 percent. During the same period, the percentage of disabled 3- and 4-year-olds served increased from 21 percent to 98 percent. A University of Kentucky study found that at-risk 7- and 8-year-olds who attended the preschool program did as well in school as other children their age who were not considered at-risk.

Why do we have this program? **Because we believe we can help all children enter school ready to learn.**

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Primary Program

Children develop at different rates, with different needs and learning styles. That's why, in Kentucky's primary classrooms, students are grouped at least part of the time based on their skills and abilities rather than solely by age. Primary teachers typically guide students through lessons that are appropriate for their skills and abilities, then assign students to hands-on learning centers around the room that reinforce what was taught.

For example, a group of 5- and 6-year-olds might work on spelling words while a more advanced group of 5- and 6-year-olds writes sentences and still another group works on paragraphs.

We believe that teachers can adapt their teaching to meet the needs of each child. This customized approach challenges each child according to his or her own abilities and therefore makes the classroom experience more interesting and rewarding for the student.

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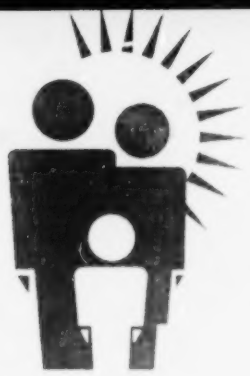

Family Resource and Youth Services Centers

Many barriers to learning have nothing to do with intelligence or academics. Poverty, health, substance abuse and teen pregnancy all present serious obstacles to classroom success.

That's why Kentucky schools play an important role in coordinating support services to help overcome these obstacles and ensure that parents are able to fulfill their responsibilities.

Family Resource and Youth Services Centers tear down some of these non-academic barriers to learning.

These centers provide health, social and community assistance and services for students and their families. They help struggling families by providing clothing, school supplies, drug and alcohol abuse and prevention services, referrals to medical care, services for children with disabilities, and help getting government financial aid. They help parents who are working to earn their General Equivalency Diplomas (GED) and provide job referral and screening services and advice for these parents.

Nearly 90 percent of Kentucky's school districts, and more than 900 schools, are served by at least one center.

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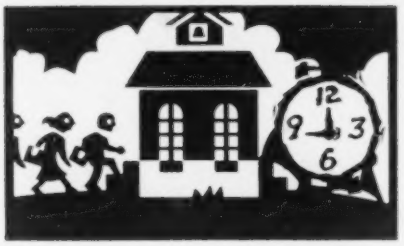

Extended School Services

Anyone who has ever struggled with school work knows that extra help from a peer, a teacher or a tutor can go a long way toward achieving success. Extended School Services is a program that provides this kind of help for students who need additional instruction to achieve academic success.

Special sessions are scheduled outside of normal school hours – before school, after school, in the evenings, on weekends or during the summer – to provide special help, whether the student needs long-term support or just a few sessions to understand a new idea or concept.

In 1996-97, 80 percent of the students participating in ESS programs for six or more days raised their grades in the subject of focus by at least one letter grade.

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Professional Development

Teachers and administrators must be well-equipped with the knowledge, skills and ability to make good judgments about teaching and learning.

That's why Kentucky provides outstanding professional development for educators. Because a teacher's effectiveness determines the degree to which his or her students have the opportunity to learn, a teacher's instructional skills and knowledge of subject content are critical.

By making a considerable investment in teacher development, Kentucky is helping its teachers implement new, higher expectations for students and craft their instructional activities accordingly.

The state earmarks money for teacher training, and shifts the authority for planning professional development programs to the teachers and councils in each school. As a result, teachers are now better prepared to meet the high expectations set for them, and they are better able to help students meet high expectations as well.

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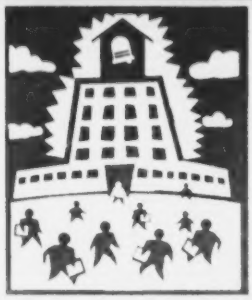
the school is the best place to make decisions about what happens in the school

Kentucky sets high standards for all its schools, then liberates and empowers teachers and parents to decide at the local school level how best to meet those standards.



School-Based Decision Making

Kentucky's school-based decision making initiative gives those people closest to students – the principal, teachers and parents – direct responsibility for making decisions about how best to teach those students. While local school boards are still responsible for setting overall district policies, school councils bring parents, teachers and principals from an individual school together to make decisions about the school.

Placing teachers and parents in the decision making process ensures that the interests and viewpoints of both are considered, and it makes for better, more responsive and more responsible policymaking. Each school council is responsible for decisions about the school's curriculum, budget, instructional materials, staffing, professional development and other areas that influence the school's learning environment and the academic achievement of its students.

Today, nearly 1,200 of Kentucky's 1,400 schools are led by councils whose membership includes an estimated 3,600 teachers. And more than 14,000 parents are now involved in school decision making, either as council members or by serving on committees established by school councils.

high standards produce high achievement

Kentucky's education policymakers know that high standards – for students and teachers – produce high achievement.

That's why today in Kentucky, the quality of a school is measured by actual results in student learning.

High Standards

Kentucky recognizes that expecting more of children and teachers results in greater academic achievement by the children and better instruction by the teachers.

Kentucky raised its academic expectations by encouraging schools to actively engage students and by using powerful assessments that measure learning growth and provide direction for future instruction.

The Academic Expectations were adopted by the Kentucky Board of Education in 1994 to clarify what Kentucky's high school students should know and be able to do by the time they graduate.

Kentucky's definition of "student achievement" includes not only a student's knowledge of content and facts, but also how well he or she can think, analyze data and solve problems.

We believe that what students actually know and can do is what really counts.

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results matter

Kentuckians know that results matter. We can teach for results and build accountability that produces high student achievement. We do that by setting high standards for student learning, assessing how well those standards are being met, and then holding schools accountable for their work. This results-based approach has led to increased academic performance in all areas of the state.

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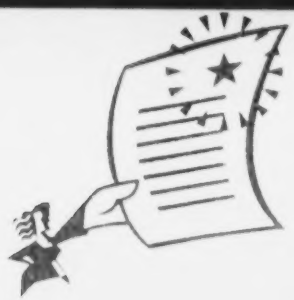
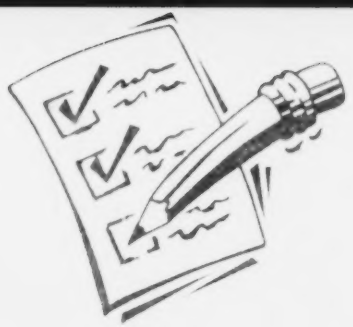


Assessment

For any organization or program to succeed, its progress must be measured. That's why Kentucky has a new test, the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS), that measures the progress schools are making in educating their students.

The new test will be given to students in various grades in elementary, middle and high school. It will cover many subjects, including reading, writing, math, science, social studies, arts & humanities, and practical living/vocational studies. Scores will be used to determine how much academic progress each school has made. Results also will be provided to students' parents, schools, districts and community members.



Accountability

Measuring progress is a good thing, but the measurement must count for something: It must result in benefits or consequences.

Kentucky recognizes that raising standards for students is a good idea. But we also know that holding students and educators accountable for their work encourages them to do their best. So Kentucky has a system of accountability for schools and districts – for educators – that rewards successful schools and helps those that are not making progress.

High standards and accountability for results are the hallmarks of every successful modern enterprise, including Kentucky's system of public education.

equity is critical

As noted on page 2, the legal challenge against Kentucky's education system in 1985 was based on equity. In its landmark ruling, the State Supreme Court said "an efficient system of common schools" would be:

- available to all Kentucky children
- substantially uniform throughout the state
- provide equal educational opportunities to all Kentucky children
- provide sufficient funding to give each child an adequate education

In response to these elements of the ruling, Kentucky established the following programs to ensure the equity of its education system.

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School Funding

Before 1990, teachers could say, "Our kids don't do as well as other kids, because we don't have as much money as other districts." Or, they could argue, "We have a lot of poor kids, and it costs more to educate them." They were right: Communities with a strong property tax base could raise more money to support local schools than could those with a weak property tax base.

Kentucky's new finance system, called Support Education Excellence in Kentucky (SEEK), is designed to ensure that funds for education are distributed in a way that provides equal educational opportunities for all Kentucky children.

Since the enactment of SEEK in 1990, Kentucky has cut the funding gap in per pupil spending between the more- and less-wealthy districts by half – from $1,200 to $600. In addition, state funding for education has increased by 46.5 percent, and local revenue for education has risen 54 percent during the same period.

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Education Technology

Kentucky recognizes two things about technology: It is the wave of the future and it has great potential as an equalizing force in the provision of educational resources. That's why we have the Kentucky Education Technology System (KETS), a $553 million initiative to provide networked computers and other electronic tools to support teaching and learning and to facilitate administrative functions at the school and district levels.

Today, Kentucky students are at the forefront in their knowledge of technology, and will therefore be better prepared when they enter the workforce. The focus on technology also has leveled the playing field so that children in every corner of the state have an equal opportunity to "visit" the Smithsonian Institution, the Library of Congress or any other educational resource via the Internet.

Kentucky was the first state to have every one of its school districts linked to an integrated network, and the ratio of students to computers has improved from 154:1 in 1992 to 8:1 in 1997. During the same period, the ratio of teachers to computers improved from 28:1 to 2.5:1.

For more information about Kentucky's education system:

Call the Department of Education's toll-free (in Kentucky only) Information Line at 800-533-5372 (502-564-3421 from outside Kentucky) or visit the Department's World Wide Web site at www.kde.state.ky.us.

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